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# Financially Sustaining University Lab Schools: One University's Story

Gloria J. Gresham Dr.

Stephen F. Austin State University, [greshamglori@sfasu.edu](mailto:greshamglori@sfasu.edu)

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Gloria J. Gresham Dr.

*Stephen F. Austin State University, greshamglori@sfasu.edu*

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University lab schools designed with the intent of preparing teacher educators are based upon the clinical teaching model pioneered in the medical field. Clinical teaching was born in 1765 when the teaching and learning of individuals seeking medical degrees focused on and usually involved patients and their problems (“School of Medicine,” 2011). In physician and nursing undergraduate level preparation programs today, students are provided as much clinical experience as possible to apply what they are learning in the lecture portion of their classes (Spencer, 2003).

Presently, clinical practice is emphasized as a way to reform and improve teacher preparation. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) commissioned a study of teacher preparation and reported findings in 2010. This report supported a clinically-based approach to teacher preparation by stating, “Creating a system built around programs centered on clinical practice also holds great promise for advancing shared responsibility for teacher preparation; supporting the development of complex teaching skills; and ensuring that all teachers will know how to work closely with colleagues, students, and community” (“Transforming,” 2010, p. ii). According to Epstein (2010), the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) urged teacher preparation programs to require teacher candidates to spend at least 450 hours in clinical settings before earning their degrees or certifications. AACTE prepared a document in 2010 titled “The Clinical Preparation of Teacher: A Policy Brief” to affirm that teaching was a clinical practice profession that required sophisticated knowledge, skill, and judgment, so student teaching (typically twelve weeks of practice) was not sufficient to prepare teachers for their future work.

For more than a century, some institutions of higher education championed clinical preparation. These institutions operated and supported a clinical teaching model to prepare teachers through the vehicle of lab schools (“Overview of Laboratory,” 2010). The university highlighted in this study was one that implemented lab schools from the time it opened its doors as a teachers college in 1923. From the beginning, the university embraced lab schools with a two-part mission: (1) to better prepare teacher educators; (2) to provide an exemplary instructional program for children where theory was modeled for teacher candidates (Hallman, 2001). Over the years, this university implemented six different lab schools as clinical teacher preparation sites:

- a demonstration elementary through high school that closed in 1951 due to the trend at the time of moving student teaching to the public schools;
- a nursery school;
- a kindergarten;
- an early childhood laboratory that merged the nursery school and kindergarten into one lab school;
- a campus charter school;

- a university charter school.

Today, the early childhood lab and university charter school, housed in one facility, serve children from birth to the age of 10. These two lab schools remain as clinical preparation sites for the elementary education teacher preparation program.

Sustaining lab schools over time is challenging especially in the current economic landscape when university funding is slashed by states at every turn. The Texas Legislature, the governing body of this university, cut higher education funding by nine percent in 2011 (Hamilton, 2011). Even though drastic cuts were instituted in this university, the two lab schools are flourishing. The intent of this article is to outline the organizational practices implemented at this university that aided in financially sustaining university lab schools as clinical preparation sites for 87 years.

### **Methodology**

In order to discover the organizational practices implemented to sustain lab schools and the clinical teaching model, a case study spanning the years of 1923 to 2010 was conducted during one academic school year beginning in the fall and ending in the spring semester. Since the researchers desired to attain a deeper understanding of the organizational practices implemented sustaining the lab school concept, the case study was selected to provide “intensive descriptions and analyses of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p. 19). Purposive or convenience sampling was used to select the participants who the researchers believed would provide the most in-depth information (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2008). The participants of the study included university administrators who had authority over the development of the lab schools and/or were the administrators of record for the lab schools, teachers who taught in the lab schools, and parents of children who attended the schools. Seventeen participants were interviewed: six administrators, seven teachers, and four parents. Specifically, the research question was: What were the organizational practices leading to sustaining lab schools as clinical preparation sites for 87 years?

Data collection involved interviews and document review. Individuals were questioned who had knowledge of the lab schools from the first lab school to the present lab schools. Artifacts were examined including board minutes, pictures, scrapbooks of pictures, newspaper articles, accreditation documents, and records from the various departments in the College of Education. Also studied were published historical accounts of the university lab schools, minutes, and documents from the lab schools. The researchers also gathered information informally through conversations with other individuals who had memories of and/or involvement with the lab schools.

All interviews were taped, transcribed, and analyzed to ascertain themes. Examination began with the first observation (Merriam, 2009). As individuals were interviewed and documents reviewed, the researchers noted and coded emerging themes. As events and stories were revealed through interviews, the researchers analyzed documents to support and verify dates and events. Triangulation was achieved through analyzing interview notes, supporting findings with numerous documents, and discussing findings with individuals knowledgeable of the lab schools. The preponderance of evidence indicated to the researchers the story of each lab school (Merriam, 2009). Through rich analysis, a cohesive story outlining the organizational practices implemented and their importance was verified. After the themes for each lab school was noted, the researchers analyzed the data across schools to determine the organizational practices consistent over time.

## Findings

Analyzed data gathered from documents and interviews painted a vivid picture of the financial organizational practices implemented to sustain lab schools as clinical preparation sites for teacher preparation. The financial organizational practices that emerged from the analyses were (a) creatively utilize state funding and regular student tuition to assist with lab schools' support; (b) institute childcare tuition to help cover costs; (c) use teacher candidate lab fees and include lab school teachers as university faculty. Following is a description of each practice.

**Creatively utilize state funding and regular student tuition to assist with lab schools' support.** In the early years, state appropriations and regular student tuition were used to operate lab schools. The first lab school was established in 1923 when the university opened and was funded through state appropriations and regular student tuition (Craddock, 1973). Clever funding led to the development of the second lab school, a nursery school. Just prior to World War II, economic times toughened; university administrators and board members sought ways to cut costs. According to "History of Human Sciences," in 1936, the first university president saw an opportunity to support an additional lab school when the university board slashed summer teaching salaries to lower expenses (n.d.). After this cut, the president noticed unexpended funds and set them aside to build a Home Management House that included a nursery school, hence supporting faculty who were preparing teachers.

During the 1960s, the family structure and role of women changed; more and more women were launching into the workforce so the urgency for childcare increased. Additionally, the nation as a whole was focusing on early childhood education. On May 18, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson, in a speech in the Rose Garden at the White House in Washington, D. C., announced the initiation

of the Head Start program. To meet the challenge of educating preschool children, the state of Texas instituted a kindergarten endorsement, and this university's College of Education responded by adding courses and curriculum for an early childhood program. Knowing that clinical preparation was critical to well-prepared early childhood educators, a classroom in a local church near the university campus was procured to implement a kindergarten lab school with the intent of preparing future kindergarten teachers. Interviews revealed that in the fall of 1970, the SFASU Kindergarten moved to an old church building that was purchased by the university board. In the fall of 1974, the SFASU Kindergarten was relocated to a new facility, renamed the Early Childhood Laboratory, and this facility housed infants through kindergarten children. On April 16, 1983, the university board authorized a contract in the amount of \$1,356,000.00 to construct an addition to the Early Childhood Laboratory (Board of Regents, 1983). This expanded lab school eventually served infants through first grade children.

During the late 90s, the local school district was overcrowded due to failed bond attempts and a growing student population. Around the same time, major education reform in the Texas Education System occurred in 1995 when the Texas Legislature overhauled the Texas Education Code (Texas Education Agency, 2007) enabling the State Board of Education to grant charter schools as an alternative to public education. These schools were minimally to comply with the education code but remained state funded. Legislation provided provisions for the creation of three types of charter schools: open enrollment charters with a cap of 160 schools unless the school served at least 75 percent "at-risk" or potential drop-out students, campus program charters granted by a school district with no cap, and home-rule school district charters also granted by a school district with no cap.

As the district and university administrators collaborated, an opportunity was realized when first a public school district second grade class was housed at the Early Childhood Laboratory in 1995. Due to its success, in 1998, a campus charter was initiated including grades kindergarten through four and housed on the early childhood campus. With this collaboration, additional state funding was released for supporting the charter school. A former administrator explained that the agreement with the local district was that the charter school would receive 85 percent of the state funds generated by the children in attendance at this lab school.

All was well with the university and district collaboration to support a campus charter until leadership in the district changed in 2006. Promised funding was not provided. The NISD/SFASU Charter School board minutes described how a former dean of the College of Education revealed that the Charter School was operating without an approved budget because of the discrepancies in funding from the district. Then, the acting district superintendent and a local school board

member pledged support, but in following years, the funding problems continued (Charter School Governance Council, 2007). In 2007, the local school district business manager acknowledged that the approximately \$600,000 to operate the charter campus was a financial burden because the district had the space to bring the children back into the district.

The university administrators were presented with an opportunity to think innovatively to expand the existing charter lab school. The university applied for an open enrollment charter, and the SFASU Charter School opened its doors in the fall of 2008. This move allowed the Charter School to directly access state funding. In 2008, the Charter School campus administrator accessed a start-up grant for \$246,179 from the Texas Education Agency to operate a kindergarten through grade five lab school (Charter School Board, 2008).

Classes for the SFASU Charter School were housed in the Early Childhood Laboratory building, in portable buildings outside this building, and one class was housed in a neighboring university facility. University administrators brainstormed possible solutions to the overcrowding. Interviews revealed that ultimately, it was decided to petition the state for a Tuition Revenue Bond to institute a research center designed to accommodate the Department of Elementary Education, the Early Childhood Laboratory, and the SFASU Charter School. The dean of the College of Education described this rationale, "For some time the College of Education has been a leader in preparing outstanding early childhood teachers in both quality and quantity." He continued, "With its nationally accredited Early Childhood Laboratory and exemplary-rated Charter School, the next progressive step is to become a research and development site" (Pattillo, n.d., p. 1). Interviews indicated that in July 2006, after some education faculty members, the university board chairman, and many other interested parties contacted state legislators, the state of Texas approved a Tuition Revenue Bond for a new education building. The state governor traveled to the university to sign the bill authorizing the funding of the Tuition Revenue Bond ("News & Events," n.d.). Interview data acknowledged that Tuition Revenue Bonds and Higher Education Funds financially supported the new \$30 million dollar facility. The dean of the College of Education recognized the support of Texas public officials for their assistance in this effort by expressing the following:

The support given by our local legislators, Senator Todd Staples, Representatives Roy Blake, and Jim McReynolds, and by Lt. Governor David Dewhurst will make this education center a reality and provide services to East Texas and the state for a long time. (Pattillo, p. 1)

State appropriations and regular student tuition were instrumental in providing facilities and funding for university faculty connected to the lab schools, but in no way were these funds sufficient to support the staffing and operational expenses. To assist with these costs, childcare tuition commenced.

**Institute childcare tuition to help cover costs.** Childcare tuition was implemented to provide additional funding for lab school operations, but according to interview data, the earliest lab schools, the Demonstration and Nursery, were mainly supported through university funding. Tuition for childcare surfaced with the implementation of the Kindergarten, and interview data revealed that childcare tuition was a major revenue source for Early Childhood Laboratory teachers' salaries. Because childcare tuition was not sufficient to mirror teacher salaries provided by the local school district, many Early Childhood Laboratory teachers and staff sought employment elsewhere. For example, a 1976 university graduate was hired as one of two kindergarten teachers for the 1976-77 academic year. She did not make enough money to meet the shared living expenses she split with her college roommate, so she quit after only four months. Another former teacher of the Early Childhood Laboratory confessed just how low the teaching salaries were:

I left public school, and my salary was cut in half to come to the lab and work there. So, salaries were extremely low. The turnover rate was high. Still another teacher of the Early Childhood Laboratory indicated reasons for leaving:

I was in the kindergarten one year and in the primary six years. I was there seven years from the fall of 1978 to spring of 1985. The only reason I left, quite honestly, was money. The difference between private school pay and public school pay was a chasm. It was huge, and it was getting worse. That was the time when the state was giving incremental raises each year, and it was getting better in public school. The private schools just could not keep up. Personally, I was pregnant with my second child.

University administrators were faced with how to lower the staff turnover rate while providing operational expenses for the Early Childhood Laboratory. Considering Early Childhood Laboratory teachers as university faculty and tapping into teacher candidate lab fees assisted in improving lab teacher salaries and supporting operational expenses.

**Use teacher candidate lab fees and include lab school teachers as university faculty.** As lab class sections were added to Elementary Education and Early Childhood courses, university teacher candidate lab fee funds were available to assist with funding the SFASU Kindergarten and Early Childhood Laboratory. A former dean explained that teacher candidate lab fees were used to purchase supplies for the lab schools beginning with the SFASU Kindergarten. A former Early Childhood Laboratory teacher showed the connection among future teachers, the curriculum, and the lab schools:

College courses had labs associated with them that required the students to spend time with the children observing and working with them hands-on. We did not have students coming from elementary classes. We were



connected to the Home Economics Child and Family Development program.

With the move to the Early Childhood Laboratory in 1974, faculty and Early Childhood Laboratory teachers taught lecture/lab courses collaboratively. Lab fees were then used to support Early Childhood Laboratory teacher salaries making it possible to provide competitive salaries. The Early Childhood Laboratory teachers were viewed as an extension of lecture classrooms and a part of the university faculty, thus critical to the preparation of future teachers. A university administrator revealed this collaboration:

We started out with all the courses having a lab, but the college professors were responsible for teaching [them]. When we moved to the new building [Early Childhood Laboratory], we changed it so we had three-hour courses with one-hour labs. The Home Economics Department was sending people over [to observe children] so that paid for part of the salary of the teachers. We believed if students used the classrooms, it was only logical that the departments pick up some of the cost of the teachers' salaries.

This university administrator further described how crucial it was to consider Early Childhood Laboratory teachers as university faculty:

Tying teachers of lab school classrooms into the university faculty and requiring these classroom teachers to teach university students provided two very important functions: (a) the mindset for these classroom teachers that they were preparing future teachers; (b) the mindset for the university that these lab courses were as valuable as labs in other academic areas.

The funding provided through officially considering lab school teachers as faculty responsible for teaching lab courses was a great marketing tool for hiring master-level classroom teachers.

When the local school district and the College of Education initiated the agreement to implement the NISD/SFASU Charter School, salaries were discussed and guidelines were established. A former Charter School administrator described the collaboration for funding salaries for the teachers:

Some of the teachers were paid a portion from the College of Education to supervise lab experiences so there was a connection. I was the Charter School academic leader so half of my salary was paid by the local school district and half by the university. As the academic leader, I served on the leadership team of the local school district just as all other principals and administrative leaders did. I was a faculty member, and I was on the administrative leadership team for the district.

Master teachers in the Early Childhood Laboratory and some SFASU Charter School faculty continue today as university instructors. Lecture courses connected with accompanying labs implemented currently in the Early Childhood

Laboratory and Charter School start with the first education courses and continue through the practicum semesters. Teacher candidates participate in two practicums: Practicum I and Practicum II which are each a semester long. By the time a teacher candidate graduates, he/she has accumulated over 750 hours of field experience.

The Elementary Education Department and the lab schools are committed to implementing the best instructional practices for the children served and to prepare future teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to implement research-based instructional pedagogy. This mission is sustained through the continued use of lab schools as teacher preparation clinical sites.

### **Conclusion**

This university has met and exceeded the AACTE recommended 450 hours of clinical practice partly due to the implementation and commitment to lab schools. Teaching is a professional like that of the medical profession where the skilled one assesses, pulls from the knowledge base of the field, and implements practices to improve the life of the one seeking assistance. It is a complicated and mentally challenging process requiring much skill. Learning at this level demands that teacher candidates actively engage with children under the watchful eye of experts. Lab schools provide varied and extensive opportunities for teacher candidates to connect what they are learning while being challenged to use what they are learning with children. As teacher candidates are growing, they are guided by lab school teachers and faculty who are accomplished, clinical educators. Sustaining lab schools as clinical teacher preparation sites can be daunting due to the financial burden incurred to implement them. One university's committed to implementing the clinical teaching model through lab schools was possible due to creatively utilizing state funding and regular student tuition to assist with the lab schools' support, instituting childcare tuition to help cover costs, using teacher candidate lab fees, and designating lab school teachers as university faculty.

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